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TO NEUTRAL PEACE-LOVERS

A PLEA FOR PATIENCE

BY

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HENRY MORSE STEPHENS

TO NEUTRAL PEACE-LOVERS.

A Plea for Patience.

As the war drags on into its third year, a curious phenomenon is becoming more and more noticeable. The neutral countries are growing more war-weary than the belligerent countries—at any rate than those belligerents who are not subjected to the pressure of the blockade. And this weariness is having the curious effect of making the friends of peace-at-any-price play into the hands of the champions of war-at-any-price. They clamour for a peace which would leave all the moral issues of the war undetermined, if not determined in the wrong sense, and which would enable Germany to maintain, with some plausibility, that war had once more proved a paying speculation for her. To all reasonable peace-lovers, that must surely seem the one intolerable disaster. If the German belief in war as “good business” is able to hold up its head at the end of the struggle, the prospects of enduring peace fade away into the mists of an immeasurable distance.

In Copenhagen the other day, one of the greatest of living men of letters, George Brandes, issued “An Appeal” for peace, obviously inspired by sheer

difficult to answer. But they ignore the other and still more essential aspect of the case.

When two men are engaged in a fierce wrestle, they seem, to the casual eye, equally frenzied and equally criminal. But this may be a quite false impression. The one may be a highwayman and the other his victim; the one may be a maniac and the other his keeper. It is not madness to seek to restrain madness, and deprive it of its means of working mischief. The deeper is our conviction of the essentially frantic nature of this struggle, the more is it incumbent upon us to keep firm hold of the fact that one side knew it from the first to be insane and entered it only on compulsion, while the other side, in obedience to long-accepted and loudly proclaimed principles, regarded it as a manifestation of the highest sanity, and, as Prince von Bülow says, went into it "in high spirits." There can be no question as to which side hungered for war and which side shrank from it. I am not thinking, for the moment, of the immediate responsibility for the outbreak, though it is abundantly clear that it does not lie at the door of the Allies. What I have in mind is the absolutely undeniable fact that Germany (with her appendages) was the one great stronghold of the war ideal. She had built up, on the basis of her experiences from 1864 to 1871, a philosophy of war as the loftiest and most

exhilarating of human activities—a philosophy to which she was fanatically devoted. She had consistently and contemptuously obstructed all movements in the direction of world-peace. She had left her political destinies unreservedly in the hands of a despotic War-Lord, whose family traditions, and whose personal tastes, made him the representative and head of an enormously powerful and arrogant military caste. She had piled up armaments that rendered her tremendously formidable on land, and she had openly addressed herself to the conquest of the sea—an enterprise regarded by her people with the utmost enthusiasm. She had, in short, committed herself irrevocably, both in theory and in practice, to the idea of war as the supreme and eternal arbiter in human affairs, and had taken every conceivable measure to ensure that the arbitrament should always result in her favour.

It was an unspeakable misfortune for Europe that such a superstition should have mastered the minds of the ruling classes of a great, and energetic, and highly efficient nation. But since the misfortune had happened, and since Germany showed herself inaccessible to remonstrance or argument, what was to be done? A small body of pacifists, headed by a great man, Tolstoy, answered that armament should be met by disarmament, violence by non-resistance. It was at once a logical and a nobly-inspired

doctrine, but it neglected the facts of human nature in its present phase of development. I am not one of those who think that human nature is the same yesterday, to-day and for ever, and that it is hopeless to dream of modifying it. I believe, on the contrary, that the balance of human impulses, on which depends the action both of individuals and of communities, is constantly shifting, whether we will or no. But such modifications are necessarily very gradual, and it is quite correct to say that, at any given moment, there are certain psychological impossibilities, as insuperable as any physical impossibility. It was psychologically impossible, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that any considerable body of men could be induced to adopt the principle of non-resistance. It was "not practical politics." Therefore, Germany's neighbours were bound to hold themselves prepared to meet force by force, while encouraging the spread of pacific ideas (through the Hague Conference, arbitration treaties, &c.), and being careful to give no occasion for just offence. Every year of peace was a clear gain ; for there were forces even in Germany that made for peace, and it was always conceivable, however unlikely, that the militarist mania might subside, or might be overpowered by the saner elements in the national spirit. Thus Europe lived, hoping against hope, from (say) the Bosnian

crisis of 1909 onwards. There was no great country, save Austro-Germany, that did not shrink from war, no country that thought it had anything to gain in the least commensurate with the evident perils of a European conflagration. Britain had absolutely nothing to acquire at the expense of Germany. It asked only for the safety of its shores, its dominions, and the commerce on which it lived. France had, no doubt, in the background of its mind, the regret for Alsace-Lorraine, Russia the aspiration towards Constantinople. But both the regret and the aspiration were more or less dormant. Neither was a motive prompting to action. Neither country, assuredly, would have dreamt of deliberately breaking the peace in order to snatch at so problematical a prize. And, still more assuredly, neither would have had the support of Britain in a war of aggression.

Then came July, 1914, and the powers of evil broke loose. The Entente made every concession, and suggested every device, that could possibly preserve peace—all to no avail. The Central Empires were bent on either crushing the Dual Alliance or convicting it of total and pitiable impotence—in either case securing a decisive triumph for the principle of Might against Reason. With a strange psychological blindness, they had reckoned that Britain would be false to her declared sympathies, and even, like Germany, to her sworn engagement to

Belgium. By the time they had realised their mistake, the frenzy had got full hold of them, and there was no turning back. So insane was their haste that it took less than a fortnight to drag eight nations into the vortex of war.

Even the Tolstoyan, though he may think resistance wicked, must recognise a certain moral distinction between attack and defence. As for a non-Tolstoyan neutral, it is hard to see how he can possibly confound the war-makers and the war-resisters in one common accusation of insanity. Do we condemn equally the burglar and the policeman who apprehends him? While they are struggling, indeed, they both do wild and harmful things; but the one is fighting for law and order, while the other wants to be a law unto himself, and (in the instance before us) vehemently asserts that his superior morality places him above all moral restraints. If this be not madness, what is? And what is sanity if it be not to resist the putting in practice of such essentially anarchic doctrines?

It is true, no doubt, that the demonstration of the madness of war becomes clearer with each new participant in the struggle. If Austria had been suffered to crush Serbia and reduce her to vassalage, no one would have spoken of madness—the principle of unscrupulous Might would have had one more successful crime to its credit, and international

anarchism would have been more firmly enthroned than ever in Central Europe. If, as Germany for a moment hoped, France had left Russia in the lurch, the struggle would doubtless have been short, and the idea of war as a highly profitable business to the nation which chooses to give its whole mind to it would have acquired fresh mastery over the Teutonic spirit. If Belgium had offered no resistance to the German irruption, and if Britain had been base and craven enough to stand aside, the contest would have been fierce and terrible, but it is only too probable that it would have been over long ere this, and that militarism would have attained its apogee in a triumph that would have made 1870 seem a pigmy affair. When we think of the state of mind induced in the German people by the highly qualified successes they have actually attained, it is hardly possible to imagine the frenzy into which an unqualified victory would have thrown them. And—mark this!—the utter hatefulness of war as conceived and conducted by the Great General Staff, would have been but partially revealed. There would have been no Belgian atrocities, no “Lusitania,” no “Falaba” or “Ancona,” and perhaps no Wittenberg. There is little doubt that it was exasperation at unexpected, obstinate and finally successful resistance that led to the worst excesses in Belgium and Northern France; and had it not

been for Britain's intervention, there would have been very little opportunity for U-boat heroism. "Weltmacht" would have been achieved at comparatively small cost, whether of German blood or of German honour, and the German philosophy of war would have attained an unheard-of prestige.

But can any neutral who now realises and bewails the madness of war hold that it would have been a desirable thing for the world that that madness should have been hidden by the glamour of a stupendous victory for the war-worshippers and war-makers? Surely such a position is not only pusillanimous but self-contradictory. It has all the pettiness of the petition, "Give us peace *in our time*." Would Dr. Brandes—if I may take him as an example—have preferred that the evil principle should come out triumphant, if thereby his nerves might be spared the strain of a prolonged contemplation of unreason and horror? I am sure that his concern for the future of humanity is not really so slight.

This war is, I repeat, the sanest of wars, inasmuch as it is demonstrating with a conclusiveness hitherto undreamt-of the hopeless lunacy of the German militarist creed. It never had a logical leg to stand on. Nothing is easier than to argue it out of the field—to show that it is based on false theology, false biology, false psychology, and more especially

on a false interpretation of the historic conjuncture of 1870. But you cannot argue a monomaniac into his senses. Germany—to the world's sorrow—had become a war-monomaniac, and she is now listening to the only form of argument to which her clouded intelligence was accessible. She is listening to it, she is hearing it with all her ears—of that there is no question. There are countless unmistakeable evidences that, whatever may be its actual conclusion, the war has taught Germany once for all that the exhilarating experiences of 1870 were due to a very exceptional conjunction of circumstances, and cannot be repeated at will, however high may be a country's organisation, and however unscrupulous its statecraft. The German people shows admirable power of "keeping a stiff upper lip." It quite naturally makes the most of its victories, both real and imaginary. But the iron has entered its soul. It no longer hopes for any adequate return for its gigantic sacrifices. I have seen with my own eyes hundreds of German letters, not specially pessimistic (or the censorship would never have let them out of the country), but one and all moaning for the end of "dieser unselige Krieg." "Unselig"—not merely "schrecklich" or "furchtbar"—is the epithet in almost universal use. What German ever dreamt of calling the war of 1870 "unselig"? Everything goes to show that the militarist philosophy

is at a great discount in Germany. It is even more depreciated than the mark. Moreover, the truth as to the origin of the war is beginning to soak into the German mind. People are gradually realising that the assertion that Germany was wantonly attacked, and was in a state of "Notwehr"—the assertion which sent the first army corps jubilant and enthusiastic over the Belgian frontier—was nothing but a pre-arranged manœuvre of statecraft, to which history will apply a briefer and still more accurate term. This truth, with others no less salutary, is slowly forcing its way through the barbed-wire entanglements of prejudice and authority-worship, in which the German intelligence is enveloped. It is no optimism, but simply a reasonable interpretation of indubitable symptoms, which maintains that the war is gradually achieving its one great end, in restoring the German people to something like sanity.

We, in England, have realised from the first that the war, with all its horror and madness, was unlike most other wars in the absolute clearness and momentous importance of the issues at stake. Never was this country—never was any country—so unanimous in feeling that, come what might, England had no choice but to stand by her ideals. It happened that plain considerations of safety dictated the same course; but had that alone been

in question, it is quite conceivable that we should not have had the foresight and the resolution to make the right choice. We were in no immediate danger. Had we suffered the German war-philosophy to score a second resounding triumph, which would have made Germany undisputed mistress of Europe, it is always possible that we might have come to some humiliating accommodation with her that would have left our material prosperity little, if at all, impaired. We might conceivably have escaped all positive, palpable evils—except self-contempt. It was not, then, any consideration of mere prudence that brought us into the field. We knew very well that, from the point of view of self-interest, we were confronting a tremendous and imminent peril in order to avert a much more remote and problematical one. What determined our action (apart from our positive obligation to Belgium) was the clear and compulsive sense that here was an Evil Thing to be combated—a hideous and sanguinary paganism, masking as culture, philosophy, even religion. How hideous, how sanguinary it was, we did not at first realise; but we knew quite enough to feel no doubt that a world subjected to German “Weltmacht” would be no world for free men to live in. One or two paradoxists argued that we had drifted into a mere “balance of power” war, like so many of the past; and a few

humanitarians, tortured by the sheer horror of the spectacle, sought relief in bewailing what they reckoned as errors of diplomacy, and blaming Sir Edward Grey for the defects of the whole European method of conducting international relations—as though he had created that method, or could have reformed it. But these paradoxists and grumblers were a quite infinitesimal minority. The common sense and sound instinct of Britain and of the Empire realised that here was an issue like scarcely another in history—a clear issue of right and wrong—an attempt of unscrupulous Might to vindicate in action its theoretic claim to be the supreme test of Right and the heaven-appointed ruler of the world.

As the weary months have gone on, though the main issue has not, indeed, become clearer—for that was impossible—some of its implications have emerged into fuller light. We have been able to place the war in a wider philosophic context than was at first possible. In this the Germans themselves have helped us. Abandoning, of late days, the crude Odin-worship of the ultra-militarists—the dogma that “Ye shall love peace as a means to new wars : and the short peace better than the long ”*—they

*I may, perhaps, be told that Nietzsche is not to be read literally, and that when he said this he probably meant something quite different—or nothing at all. My answer is that it matters not what he meant ; his words, at their face value, express quite accurately the spirit of the Treitschke-Bernhardi philosophy.

have advanced the claim that a German victory would benefit the world, since Germany would then apply her incomparable genius to the organising of peace. Now many of us have long recognised that the organising of peace is, indeed, a thing necessary and inevitable. It was long ago plain that if the world was to be for ever the scene of the chaotic welter of insatiate cupidities and blind "expansive" instincts postulated in the German war-philosophy, civilisation was doomed, and a relapse to barbarism a mere matter of time. This it needed no wizard to foretell. I myself—one of many—in a little book published in 1912, wrote as follows:—

“ If this race or that is to multiply until it is forced by the imminence of famine to hurl itself, in a war of extermination, on another and less fertile race, then civilisation can be nothing but an intermittent gleam between periodic convulsions of barbarism, compared with which the horrors of the Great Migrations would seem like child's-play. This is not, in fact, a possible contingency. In one way or another it would certainly be obviated—conceivably by the enslavement of the world under the iron rule of a military oligarchy, armed with all the resources of science. That possibility is perhaps less remote than we imagine.”

It was, indeed, less remote than I imagined when I wrote these words ; for it is the eventuality towards which German thought, as chastened by the Battle of the Marne, is now veering. The Naumann conception of " Mittel-Europa "—a Mid-Europe extending from Antwerp to Bagdad—is no small step towards the formulation of the wider ideal. We see, then, that we have a subtler enemy to contend against than the crudely militarist philosophy of Treitschke and Bernhardi, which was always self-contradictory and impossible when you followed it up to its most obvious consequences. There is nothing either impossible or self-contradictory in the conception of a world " organised " by the German drill-sergeant for the benefit of a close corporation of supermen, ruling in virtue of their command of the destructive armory of science. If any neutral likes the picture let him pray for a German victory, or counsel the Allies to make a patched-up and inconclusive peace.

What is quite certain is that, under the surface issue of *Might versus Right*, international truculence and violence *versus* international amenity and conciliation, there lies the no less real issue of autocratic and compulsory *versus* democratic and voluntary organisation. Fortunately, it is not in the least true that German talent for organisation is anything unique or extraordinary. It is true that

Germany was wonderfully organised and equipped for war—even down to the incendiary appliances required for such an exploit as the burning of Louvain. But the organisation which she had elaborated for forty years, France and Britain, under the very stress and anguish of war, improvised in a twelvemonth. Russia, too, has shown a truly wonderful recuperative and organising capacity. Again, the British Fleet is an institution in which organisation is not entirely lacking. Nor is America, the home of democracy, quite devoid of organising capacity. The great trusts and corporations are too highly organised to suit all tastes. The people who conceived the vast railway terminals and the giant sky-scrappers of New York have a good deal of that grandiose spirit of order which is the essence of organisation. As for the Panama Canal, it is a triumph of organisation which throws any single German achievement into the shade. There is not the slightest reason to suppose that the power of organisation is identical with, or inseparable from, militarist fanaticism. Within a week of the outbreak of war, we in England realised that we were living in a state of socialism; and we were amazed to find that the new organisation, imperfect as it necessarily was, worked quite smoothly. Since then it has been enormously developed; and though the inevitable grumbles are heard—(is there no grumbling in

Germany?)—the experiment is, on the whole, an astonishing success. There is not the slightest reason to doubt that the organisation of peace can be conducted quite as well on democratic as on autocratic-militarist lines. The fact that the Western Allies stand for this principle, and that there is good hope that even Russia may gravitate towards its acceptance, is another reason why we hold ourselves entitled to sympathy, rather than querulous reproof, from the democratic peoples of the neutral world.

WILLIAM ARCHER.

